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ABSTRACT

Described is the Complete Help and Assistance Necessary for a College Education (C.H.A.N.C.E.) Program established at Northern Illinois University for minority students who had not met the traditional admission standards of ACT score and class rank. Instead, these students were selected on the basis of their motivation, their leadership, and recommendations. Components of the program include a special nine-hour block of courses in speech, reading, and English utilizing team teaching; a skills center staffed by upper division tutors (which also served as a resource center with supplementary materials); and video tape playback equipment to allow the tutors to discuss taped classroom performances. A special grading system was devised to help build self-concept, and course materials were presented at a slower pace. Small class size and personal attention provided by the instructor also increased self-confidence. Additional skills developed include test-taking skills, vocabulary, speech skills, and library skills. (HOD)

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THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE--PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

C.H.A.N.C.E.: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Student Deficiencies in Communication Skills

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In the mid-sixties at Northern Illinois University there was a growing concern over both the low number of minority students enrolled at the University and the low retention of these students at Northern. This was considered a problem because Northern is a state university situated near the large minority population of Chicago. Investigation revealed that a primary cause of the small number of minority students enrolled was the standard practice of using ACT scores and class rank as a predictor of success and therefore as the standards for admission. The faculty concluded that the alarmingly poor retention rate reflected the kind of instruction these students had received in the basic communication skills prior to arriving at the University. Northern Illinois University initiated a program to alleviate these problems. This paper will describe initial development of the program, the changes that have taken place in the program in its first five years, and some of the special problems students in this program bring to the classroom.

Increasing minority student enrollment was one of the first concerns. The University Administration hired a special staff to recruit minority students and provided a counseling program for the students once they arrived on campus. They labeled this program C.H.A.N.C.E.: Complete Help and Assistance Necessary for a College Education. Yet, the creation of a special recruiting staff and counseling program did not totally solve the problem. Most of the potential students could not meet the traditional admission standards of ACT score and class rank. The admission dilemma was solved by allowing the recruiter/counselor to wave the traditional admission requirements. Instead they considered a number of factors including: the student's motivation, evidence of leadership, and recommendations of teachers, counselors, clergy and other professionals.

The C.H.A.N.C.E. staff believed that these factors might be better indicators of success than the traditional tests which all pointed to student failure. The scope of this admissions policy is clearly evident in this early policy statement taken from "The C.H.A.N.C.E. Newsletter" which was issued by the recruiter/counselors.

> The C.H.A.N.C.E. program will use sensitive and imaginative methods to seek out the qualities which show latent potential. We seek to build the hopes and expectations of minority students by showing that Northern Illinois University cares and is concerned. We have a regular schedule to visit the students at their schools, their community spots, and their homes so that we will know not only their backgrounds and environments, but their anxieties and aspirations. We bring them to our campus to spend a "college day" with us. We provide these experiences for groups of seniors on a regular prearranged schedule. We talk on a "gut level" basis about all the realities of college and what is expected of them . . . Then the regular official application comes to us from those who still think they are interested in college. The application is completed by the student and counselor and sent to our office without the application fee. . . . The application is accompanied by. . .two letters of reference; a letter from a school official who knows the student; and a letter from a community person such as an employer, youth director, or minister. . . . Also, [the student is asked to include] a personal letter telling about himself, his family, and why they are interested in a college education. Then a personal interview is conducted with the student. All of this information helps us to get a fairly accurate assessment of the student's abilities, motivation, and potential. This knowledge of the student helps determine his admission to Northern Illinois University through the C.H.A.N.C.E. Program, but equally important, it gives us a recorded guide to how to best advise the student. . . .

Meanwhile a group of faculty from the Speech and English Departments and representatives from the University Reading Clinic and Communication Services turned their attention to solving the retention problem. Their initial change in the normal procedure was to create a number of speech and English sections that included a population of fifty percent minority students and fifty percent students admitted under the regular university admission procedure. The objective was to create a more comfortable learning situation for the minority students. Thus, the frequent problem

of being the only minority student in a particular section of speech or English would no longer be the case. Yet, after a semester under this system, the instructors were convinced that merely providing a more comfortable environment in which to study communication skills was not enough. The performance of these students indicated that more attention was needed to a variety of deficiencies that they brought from their previous educational institutions. Therefore, a decision was made to create a special nine hour block of courses to include speech, reading, and English. These courses would be a block in the sense that a team of three instructors, one from each of these areas, would work with the same group of students. This would make close coordination of the effort possible and facilitate team teaching. The instructors concluded that these English and speech courses should include the same content as the regular freshman English and speech courses, but should also teach some basic study skills.

At this point, the staff believed that they were on the way to solving the problem. But, they found that not all the students being admitted under this special program needed the special block. Yet, there was no procedure for deciding which students admitted under the C.H.A.N.C.E. Program needed the special help and which did not. All students admitted under the C.H.A.N.C.E. Program had been automatically placed in these sections and the non-minority students had been enrolled at random through the normal course sign-up procedure. The result was that part of the class did not need the program and was not challenged when the instructor discussed basic skills, while the other part greatly needed this type of instruction. In answer to this problem, the staff

devised a simple screening procedure. A sample of the C.H.A.N.C.E. student's written and oral communication was evaluated during summer orientation and the student was advised if he or she needed the basic skills instruction of the block. Non-C.H.A.N.C.E. students with scores of nineteen or lower on the ACT test were screened by the same procedure and were advised if they needed the special program.

Improved screening better identified which students needed help, but some of these students found it difficult to discuss their academic problems. Some students felt that by admitting a weakness they might cause their instructor to think less favorably about their abilities. Others were just plain shy at confronting an authority figure. To solve this problem, a skills center was established and staffed by tutors who were upper division students with good academic records and showed the ability to tutor students. Many of these tutors were minority students who were products of the early years of our program. Their experience with the program gave them insights which were valuable in helping with special problems. The peer tutoring concept worked so well that in subsequent semesters the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences provided peer tutoring for these students in subjects outside of the block.

This Skills Center also served as a resource center. It was used to house numerous supplementary materials, much of which was specifically oriented to minority groups. In addition, books for biology, history, political science, and other courses which these students take concurrently with the block were provided for cross reference with the texts normally assigned in these courses. In January 1974, the center took on an additional function. Video tape playback equipment was provided to allow the tutors to discuss taped classroom performances. The taping of

performances allows the instructor to devote more class time to the kind of work necessary for skill building and provides more individualized instruction for the student.

The initial concept of the C.H.A.N.C.E. Admissions Program, with the addition of the Communication Skills block and Peer Tutoring, provided a total program that was quite effective. Yet, the faculty with their special abilities has been an important ingredient for working with the skill deficiencies these students bring to the classroom. Students who come to our program are products of crowded classrooms, outdated materials and textbooks, and inadequate attention to study skill problems. These factors, often combined with poor housing, deteriorating neighborhoods, and split families, produce a combination of problems. These students lack many of the skills that we take for granted that the average freshman will possess. In general these students suffer from the following problems when placed in the college setting:

1. Basic writing, reading, and speaking difficulties,
2. Low self-concept,
3. Vocabulary deficiencies,
4. Inadequate test-taking skills, and
5. Unfamiliarity with library facilities.

The writing and speech courses offered at Northern are designed to care for basic writing and oral communication difficulties. With the addition of a course in reading, the basic skill deficiencies of writing, reading, and speaking are met. But, special attention must be given to the remaining problem areas.

Our typical students have suffered from an inferior education and usually are quite aware of it. They feel inferior because they have been counseled by high school guidance counselors and others into expecting that they should take on some sort of unskilled or semi-skilled work upon high

school graduation. Their ACT test scores also told them that they are inferior. This low self-concept that students bring to the classroom presents a monumental task for the instructor. One device used to help the student rebuild the damaged self-concept is the special grading system used in the block classes. Instructors are permitted to take the penalty out of not succeeding. Students that would normally receive a D or F at the end of the semester are permitted to receive a W (withdrawn). This allows the student to continue work into a second semester if necessary to build the skill level necessary for survival in the regular curriculum. The instructors also emphasize the success that students have enjoyed in this program. The instructor reports to the students that their chances of being at Northern next year is far better than that of the average freshman entering N.I.U.: sixteen percent better to be exact. In addition, the instructor emphasizes that more of our students make it into their junior year than regular university students.

A second avenue to building self-confidence is the arrangement of course material to promote a feeling of success and progress. Many instructors begin the semester at a slower than normal pace, giving the student more time to complete the work and giving shorter assignments. This affords the student more opportunity to do the assignment carefully and to seek extra help if necessary. Then, as the semester progresses, the instructors speed up the pace so that the student has completed the normal curriculum by the end of the semester.

A third opportunity to develop self-confidence is through the high degree of personal attention provided by the instructor. The small class size, fifteen students, gives the instructor time to meet with each student

on a one-to-one basis. These conferences provide the opportunity to deal with specific academic matters and to build the student's self-confidence by reinforcing the student's strengths.

Another problem related to their inferior education is vocabulary deficiencies. Vocabulary problems range from the student who finds five new words in the first two paragraphs of the textbook to the student who finds five unfamiliar words in the whole chapter. Since the mastery of vocabulary is critical in each of the block courses, this is one area where the team approach, i.e., reading, speech, and English, is very helpful. Often the instructors will ask the students to keep a single notebook of all the unfamiliar words they encounter in their reading. Then the time devoted to discussion of vocabulary can be divided among the three classes and each instructor can reinforce the other's work. Often the student who has severe vocabulary problems needs special work outside of class. The reading instructor may provide specific work with one of the textbooks used in class or use some of the supplementary materials available in the Skills Center.

Another often traumatic experience for our students is the confrontation with the essay examination. Most of our students have had very little experience with this type of examination because their teachers found little time in their crowded classrooms for anything but objective examinations. Therefore, most instructors begin by discussing the basics of studying for this type of examination. One technique used is as follows. The first step is to get the student to recognize the important concepts in the textbook and how questions could be formulated from these. The students begin by working in a group to pick out the important concepts from the chapters and then formulate possible essay examination questions. The group then

agrees on a set of questions that represent the important concepts within the given chapter. Next, the instructor presents the groups a list of questions drawn from the same chapter for them to use for comparison. A discussion of the differences ensues. Next, each student takes this list and formulates answers to these questions. The second step, recognizing what is a good answer, comes after the examination is completed. The technique used here is to mark each student's examination for identification and remove the cover so that the author cannot be identified by the reader. Then groups of students are asked to read the answer to a specific question for each member of the class and to rate them. The rating system used is Very Good (VG), Adequate (A), Inadequate (I), and Not Acceptable(NA). Each student sees and rates his or her own question as it comes to the group. This forces comparison. After all papers have been read, the groups are asked to look at all the ratings for the question they are examining for each paper and come to consensus on a rating for the question. This provides a chance to discuss why a particular paper was rated as it was. The student is asked to list the differences between those answers rated low and those answers rated high. The instructor discusses some of these with the class and explains how the students can improve their own test taking skills.

Most of our students have problems with assignments involving research because they are unfamiliar with the library and basic research techniques. To overcome this problem the three block instructors divide the responsibility for in class discussion of the various kinds of resource material. Then, the reading instructor arranges for a library tour. After these two steps are completed, the students receive a "Library Hide 'N Seek" handout which requires them to go to specific reference sources and record

specific information. This provides the student with practice in the use of a wide variety of reference materials and provides the instructor with an opportunity to check the student's competence in the use of the library. The completion of this orientation is followed by speech and writing assignments which provide the student the opportunity to use the skills gained.

The building of these specific study skills is integrated into the framework of the basic English and speech courses. The speech segment typically includes these topics and activities: (1) discussion of the communication process; (2) explanation of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public levels of communication; (3) discussion of audience analysis and the special importance of cultural background as an ingredient in audience analysis (and in group discussions and even in intrapersonal communication); (4) participation in group discussions; (5) discussion of mass media and propaganda; (6) units in reasoning, organization, delivery, use of evidence, etc.; (7) three rounds of public speeches; and (8) the writing of a paper known as the "communication log."

Of these assignments, cultural background as an important part of audience analysis, the three rounds of speeches, and the communication log warrant further explanation. An emphasis is placed on the importance of cultural background in audience analysis because much of the student's communication will be transracial. Students are encouraged to discuss how their communication about a particular subject would differ if they were talking about a particular subject, for example, to a white employer as opposed to a black or chicano employer or to a white friend as opposed

to a black or chicano friend. These students are quite aware that they communicate in a different way to different racial groups, but have not often stopped to discover how this is different. Often students are asked to prepare a speech for two different audiences. Then these are compared to discover the different use of language.

A second area of the course outline that may concern the listener is that only three rounds of speeches are assigned. What this means is three rounds of acceptable speech performances. This concept goes hand in hand with the grading philosophy of this course. The student may be given the opportunity to do a particular speech several times before he or she achieves the level of competency desired by the instructor. This in fact means that many students end up giving many more than three speeches.

The third area which warrants explanation is the communication log assignment. This is a forced analysis of every day communication. The student is asked to record in detail several communication events and to write a detailed analysis describing any breakdowns that took place and discussing how he or she would improve the communication. This encourages the student to apply what is being taught and demonstrated in the classroom to that person's communication outside of class. If used early in the semester, these assignments give the instructor an idea of how well the student understands what is being discussed in the classroom.

The block courses do not solve all of our students' problems. The Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has recently pointed out that our students are having difficulties with the basic science courses. Currently the College is exploring the possibility of offering a special

program that would help these students get a sound orientation in scientific study. As a temporary measure the College is providing a peer tutoring program in biology, physics, and other science courses. The Communication Skills Block and success it has enjoyed is inspiring this institution to expand the limited concept to other areas.

Teaching of disadvantaged students at Northern has been very successful. There is no doubt that the success is a function of the admissions/counseling program and the type and quality of the academic instruction. This program can be duplicated, at least in part, at most institutions. The techniques that I have been discussing can be applied in any classroom where there are educationally disadvantaged students. As classroom instructors, you can apply the techniques discussed here (or variations of these techniques) if your students experience some of these problems. I challenge you to discover teaching techniques that can be used successfully to teach the disadvantaged student and to share these ideas with others who teach these students.